

# Reay - Cassley Wild Land Area



## Context

This large Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 560 km<sup>2</sup> across north west Sutherland from Scourie in the north to Rosehall in the south. In the north the WLA mainly comprises cnochan moorland, with a high and irregular mountain range within the central section, and simpler peatland slopes in the south. One of a cluster of seven WLAs in the north west of Scotland, flanked by main (sometimes single track) roads, it is relatively distant from large population centres.

Geology has a strong influence on the WLA, which lies partly within the Moine Thrust Belt and within the area of the North West Highlands Geopark<sup>i</sup>. This is emphasised by the stark contrast of cnochan comprising hard Lewisian gneiss, greener slopes over Durness limestone (that includes many caves), and high rocky mountains formed of Cambrian quartzite.

Land within the WLA is used mainly for deer stalking and fishing, and is largely uninhabited. The area is viewed by many people from outside its edges, including along the A838 between Lairg and Laxford Bridge, the A837 between Oykel Bridge and Skiag Bridge, and the A894 between Skiag Bridge and Scourie. In these views, the outward-facing slopes of the WLA form a fairly simple visual backdrop, but it is difficult to see into the interior; however, from further away or across open water, the interior mountains can sometimes be seen more clearly rising up above the lower landforms that surround them.

Within the WLA, the two Munros of Ben More Assynt and Conival attract many hillwalkers due to their distinctive qualities. Also popular are the three Corbetts, the deep fjords of Lochs Gleann Dubh and Glencoul (just outside the WLA boundary), the Eas a' Chùal Aluinn waterfall (reputed to be Britain's highest falls, with a sheer drop of 200m) and the Bone Caves near Inchnadamph. Some people also penetrate further into the interior for stalking, hillwalking or fishing, aided by a network of tracks and paths. A section of the Cape Wrath Trail (unmarked) also crosses the area between Glen Oykel in the south and Achfary in the north, following a number of alternative routes both on and off-path.

The scenic qualities of the WLA are recognised by its inclusion in part within the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area, the description<sup>ii</sup> for which states: *'Assynt and Coigach present a landscape unparalleled in Britain...'* and *'the landscape presents a stark but harmonious juxtaposition of rocky landscapes of mountain, moorland and coast'*.

This WLA is edged by roads or conifer plantations to the north, west and south, and by Loch Shin and a road corridor to the east. From elevated locations, the area may seem to extend further into neighbouring WLAs where the intervening glens are screened. This includes to the Foinaven - Ben Hee WLA (37) to the north, and the Quinag WLA (33) and Inverpolly – Glencanisp WLA (32) to the west. In contrast, human elements create a more obvious edge to the south west, south and south east, meaning that the wild land qualities do not seem to extend so strongly in these directions.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A range of large, irregular, rocky mountains with steep, arresting slopes and a variety of lochs and lochans, possessing a strong sense of naturalness, remoteness and sanctuary**

This WLA includes an *awe-inspiring* range of high mountains, ridges and plateaux. These are very irregular and *rugged* in form, with crags, tops and corries jumbled together in a sporadic manner. In combination with a predominance of exposed rock and distinct geological features, this contributes to a strong *perception of naturalness*.



The massive proportions of the mountain range are very imposing and convey a strong *sense of awe*. The towering vertical dimensions of some rock faces and glen slopes are also *arresting*, emphasised further by high waterfalls and steep scree slopes. The distinctive height, shapes, colours and textures of the mountains are accentuated by their contrast with the horizontal emphasis of adjacent lower-lying cnocan, glen floors, lochs and lochans.



It is *physically challenging* to ascend or traverse the mountains because of their great *ruggedness* and elevation, as well as the difficulty of crossing rocky ground (particularly when wet or icy), and this can contribute to a perception of high *risk*.

The superlative qualities of the high mountains, glens, fjords and lochans attract many visitors. Many of these are drawn to the network of paths through the hills, to the Munro and Corbett peaks, to Lochs Gleann Dubh and Glencoul (just outside the WLA boundary) and their adjacent bothies, or to renowned features such as the Bone Caves or Eas a' Chùal Aluinn waterfall. Although many people visit these and other parts of the WLA at certain times, they are typically dispersed within such a large area that a strong *sense of sanctuary* and *solitude* prevails.

The mountains include a wide range of lochs, lochans and pools of different scale and elevation, reflecting the irregular nature of the landform following glaciation. The open, horizontal waters of these waterbodies emphasise the vertical and rugged forms of the adjacent mountain slopes, contributing to the *sense of awe*. They also increase the sense of openness and can act as a physical barrier to walking that increases *remoteness*. This is overcome on some lochs by the use of boats; although, even when using these, access is limited by weather, and landing is restricted by rocky and steep



shorelines. Where motorised boats are used, their movement and noise may diminish the *sense of sanctuary* within the surrounding area, albeit temporarily.

Within some parts of the WLA, the mountain slopes and cliffs harbour native woodland that increases shelter and contributes to the *sense of naturalness*, especially where extensive and fitted closely to the *rugged* landform and features such as burns and loch shorelines.

- **An awe-inspiring, broad scale expanse of cnocan in which there is a complex pattern of features at a local level that contribute to the sense of naturalness and sanctuary**

Within the northern part of the WLA, there is an extensive area of cnocan which, at a broad scale, collectively forms a wide horizontal expanse. This is sometimes seen in stark contrast to prominent mountains viewed in the distance, highlighting the distinctive and *arresting* qualities of both landforms.



The cnocan is extremely irregular and *rugged* in form, although not high in elevation. At a local level, it harbours an intricate mix of lochans, bogs, burns and, in some places, woodland and waterfalls.

All these features are irregular in form and pattern and, in combination with exposed rock, amplify the *sense of naturalness*. The cnocan also creates intricate spaces at a local level where there can be a strong sense of *sanctuary and solitude*. These qualities are influenced by a prevailing *absence of human artefacts* within the cnocan interior and little evidence of *contemporary land use*.

A consistent mosaic of vegetation and rock over the cnocan, in combination with an absence of human elements, means that it is difficult to perceive scale and distance over these areas, resulting in them often appearing more *extensive* than their actual size warrants.

Where human elements are located within the margins of the WLA, small or low-lying elements tend to have limited visibility due to screening by the landform. This means, when walking into the WLA, human elements around the edges can be lost from view after just a short distance, resulting in a *perception of remoteness* and *sanctuary* in locations that are not physically very *remote*.

- **A variety of spaces created by irregular landforms in which there is perceived naturalness, as well as a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude**

Highly irregular landforms occur throughout the WLA, from the high mountain tops to the low-lying peatland. The complexity of these, for example with variable peaks, plateaux, shelves and basins, means it is often difficult to judge relative elevation and location. This irregularity adds to the *ruggedness* of the area, as well as its perceived *naturalness*. It also means that moving through the landscape can be a dynamic experience, following an indirect route along which there is alternating orientation, enclosure and exposure, high and low elevation, and concealment or revelation of views.



Within the corries, basins or shelves, the surrounding shielding landform often leads to a sense of being hidden, contributing to a strong sense of seclusion and *sanctuary*. Where surrounded by high, steep and towering slopes, there is also a strong *sense of awe*. Many of these areas contain lochs or lochans, with an associated strong sense of place and tranquillity. Perceived seclusion and few visitors to these areas, may also lead to a strong *sense of solitude*.



- **Extensive, elevated peatland slopes whose simplicity and openness contribute to a perception of awe, whilst highlighting the qualities of adjacent mountains**

To the east and south of Ben More Assynt, there is an extensive area of elevated peatland slopes that form relatively low, broad ridges extending from either side of Glen Cassley. The vast scale of these simple peatland slopes, in combination with a strong sense of openness and exposure, appears *arresting*. Furthermore, these simple slopes highlight the contrasting and distinctive aspects of complex and high mountains to the north and west, emphasising the *awe-inspiring* qualities of these.

Although the peatland slopes are not very high in elevation and are simple at a broad scale, they are *rugged* at a local level due to a mix of lochans, bogs, peat hags, burns and rock outcrops that make the slopes *physically challenging* to cross. The seemingly random pattern of these elements also contributes to the *sense of naturalness*, while the openness and high exposure of the area heightens the *sense of risk*.



The simplicity of landcover and landform within the peatlands mean that it is typically difficult to perceive scale and distance. This can result in the area appearing more *extensive* than warranted by its actual size.

From the peatland slopes within the south of the WLA, *human artefacts* and *contemporary land use* can be clearly seen extending around the south east, south and south western edges. Human elements that are visible include extensive estate buildings, conifer plantations, roads, a hydro-electric scheme (with above surface pipes) and wind farms outside the WLA and telecom mast and grazing within the area. These elements tend to be visible over long distances due to the openness and simplicity of the peatland. They are also clearly noticeable within elevated views from the adjacent mountains and ridges to the north and west.

Around the slopes to the south west, south and south east, there are some extensive conifer plantations that extend out of neighbouring glens, as well as some wind farms upon elevated peatland. These elements highlight the limited extent of the WLA which, otherwise, might appear to extend towards the Rhiddoroch - Beinn Dearg – Ben Wyvis WLA (29) to the south. Although located outside the WLA, their extensive size and/or cumulative effects appear to encroach upon the wild land qualities where extending onto elevated ground out of the apparent confines of the glen floors and where of contrasting line, form or colour to the backdrop.



Within the upper stretches of Glen Cassley that lie outside the WLA, human elements tend to have limited effects where they appear isolated, small scale, concentrated and low-key in siting and design. In contrast, they seem more encroaching upon the wild land qualities where large in scale, extensive or are more numerous, and thus lead to cumulative effects, especially given the central position of the glen in relation to the WLA that extends to both the east and west of this.

Duchally hydro-electric scheme, within the upper reaches of the glen, has a strong influence on surrounding wild land qualities, because of both individual and cumulative effects of

its various *artefacts*. These include prominent and incongruous pipelines that cross the upper glen slopes, as well as a long access road and powerlines extending over the elevated peatland slopes at Maovally; conversely, the power station and dam structures are located more discretely within a narrow section of the glen floor.



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#### Endnotes and select references

<sup>i</sup> The North West Highlands was the first European Geopark. More information is available at <http://www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk/>

<sup>ii</sup> SNH (2010) *The special qualities of the National Scenic Areas*. SNH Commissioned Report No 374.

**Site assessment carried out September and October 2013**